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ABSTRACT

There is a substantial literature covering efforts by college counseling centers over the past 20 years to identify problems faced by students and their needs for counseling services on campus. A study was conducted which surveyed a representative sample drawn from the general student population of a large university, across the undergraduate, professional, and graduate colleges. Students (N=629) completed a 68-item survey of academic, career, personal, and interpersonal concerns. Students were asked to rate the intensity of problems they were experiencing and to report their preferences for counseling service formats, their knowledge of counseling services available on campus, and their satisfaction with any of the counseling center's services they had used. A second form of the questionnaire was administered to faculty, staff, administrators, and campus ministry workers to determine their perceptions of student concerns. The results revealed that student respondents as a group rated career-related and financial items highest, followed by academic/study skill items. Generally speaking, higher concern levels were associated with certain student groups: females, lower-grade-point-average students, minority ethnic group members, and undergraduate students. Academic and personal concern categories showed the most group differences, followed by career, and then relationship concerns. The four nonstudent groups surveyed accurately rated career items highest, but tended to overestimate the level of student concerns across all items. A four-page list of references and five data tables are appended. (NB)

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A University-Wide Survey of Students' Needs for Counseling

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August, 1985

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Abstract

A needs assessment study at a large university surveyed both students and other members of the university community (faculty, staff, administrators, and campus ministry worker for their perceptions of student concerns. The 68-item survey questionnaire covered a wide range of career, academic/study skill, interpersonal relationships, and personal concerns. Student respondents as a group rated career-related and financial items highest, followed by academic/study skill items. Some group differences (gender, race, age, GPA, class rank) were observed. The four non-student groups accurately rated career items highest, but tended to over-estimate the level of student concerns across all items.

Introduction

There is a substantial literature covering efforts by college counseling centers over the past 20 years to identify problems faced by students and their needs for counseling services on campus. (Robbins, May, & Corazzini, 1985; Lustman, Souva, & O'Hara, 1984; Newton, Angle, Schuette, & Ender, 1984; Beard, Elmore, & Lange, 1982; Mayes & McContha, 1982; Pollard, Priorkowski, & Utz, 1982; Weissberg, Berentsen, Cote, Cravey, & Heath, 1982; Flores, 1975; Utz, 1974; Houston, 1971).

The studies differ from one another in several methodological respects. Some of the samples used are not representative of the campus populations and several are small ($n < 100$) in size. For the most part, undergraduates, particularly freshmen and incoming students, have been the ones queried. Several studies have obtained their information only from counseling service providers. In a number of studies, students were asked not about their own problems, but about their perceptions of problems among students in general. Instruments used have included The Thematic Apperception Test, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, the Mooney Problem Check List, the Life Stress Inventory, existing counseling records, and questionnaires devised by the investigators.

Houston's (1971) retrospective review of the literature on problems of college students from the 1940s through the 1960s identifies the top problem area as "general academic." Other major areas were dating, autonomy, and vocational planning. In a later literature review, Tryon (1980) suggested there had been a shift over the decade of the 1970's from intra- or interpersonal concerns to grades, finances, and career choice. In a broad discussion of assessment for counseling services on campus, Corazzini (1979) also suggested that the climate of society as a whole had shifted from concerns about personal growth and communication to career and financial concerns. However, recent

discussion (Robbins, May, & Corazzini, 1985), argues counseling centers are seeing students with more severe and chronic problems, such as personality disorders, than in the past.

It seems, then, opinions differ on what problems college and university students have that can be dealt with by counseling services. The differences may be attributable not only to methods used to come to the conclusions presented in the literature, but also to the types of institutions and services from which the data are drawn. Characteristics to be taken into account include: size of the institution; urban or rural location; whether the student body is undergraduate only or includes graduate and professional students; and whether the counseling services are located in a student health services setting which includes psychiatric services.

This article describes a study which asked students to rate the intensity of problems they were experiencing while attending a large, urban, public university in the upper midwest. Participants were also asked for their preferences for counseling service formats, about their knowledge of counseling services available on campus, and satisfaction with any of the Counseling Center's services they had used. The latter two topics had last been the target of a Counseling Center general survey in 1970.

The study is distinctive because it surveyed a representative sample drawn from the general student population, across the undergraduate, professional, and graduate colleges. The survey instrument contained items covering a range of topics: academic, career, personal, and interpersonal. We also surveyed other members of the university community for their perceptions of students' concerns. Included in this part of the survey were faculty, staff, administrators, and campus ministry workers. The study described here combined some features of previous studies of student needs, with an emphasis on determining what students in general reported as their own concerns.

Method

Instrumentation

Two forms of a needs assessment questionnaire were developed, each form listing 68 concerns that students were thought likely to have. The student form asked students to rate the strength of their own concerns. The second form was developed to survey student concerns as perceived by faculty, staff, administrators, and campus ministry workers.

The 68 items were selected from a pool of 236 items generated by Counseling Center staff and from existing needs surveys. The final item selection was made by a committee of four counseling psychologists, using the criteria of content validity (fair representation of student concerns) and brevity (to minimize administration time and mailing costs). A five-point Likert-type scale was chosen, ranging in response strength from 1 ("Not a concern") to 5 ("Very much a concern"). The alternation of the response poles to avoid response set was considered, but subsequently rejected on the grounds that, first, the nature of the concern items did not allow a straightforward reversal of poles, and second, the comments of the pilot study sample indicated that students found the present format somewhat difficult without introducing further variation in response format.

Following Dillman's (1978) recommendation for survey organization, the items were groups into four logically derived categories (career, academic, relationship, personal) rather than dispersed throughout the survey. The formulation of the four concern categories was based on the committee's own counseling experiences and the precedent set by other student needs assessment studies (e.g., Weissberg et al., 1984), with the realization that some student concerns may overlap categories. a subsequent factor analysis of student responses at the item level lent support to the validity of the categorization scheme (Loeffler, Haynes, Volk, & Rengel, 1984).

Table 1 shows the number of items, estimated reliabilities, sample means standard deviations, and representative items for each concern category and for the overall survey.

Insert Table 1 about here

Following the concern items, each form devoted a full page to demographic items and questions about Counseling Center utilization, satisfaction, and preferred mode of delivery of counseling services.

A pilot study was conducted for both forms. The student pilot study sample consisted of 81 students enrolled in a non-credit study skills course taught by Counseling Center staff. The faculty et al. form was distributed to Counseling Center staff. Both forms were further revised on the basis of the pilot study groups' responses and comments. The administration time for both forms was approximately ten minutes.

Subjects

Students

The Office of Admissions and Records randomly selected 1006 student names and addresses from the population of over 40,000 students registered during winter quarter 1984. The representativeness of the student sample was assessed by means of two chi-square goodness-of-fit tests for the distribution of gender and college, the only variables for which population values were available. Neither test was significant (X^2 (1, N = 1004) = 0.99; X^2 (15, N = 1006) = 16.80), indicating the sample was representative of the population for those two factors.

A total of 629 (62.5%) responded to the survey. These results are

consistent with the response rates of other needs assessment surveys conducted by mail (e.g., 43%, Flores, 1975; 65%, Cook et al., 1984; 65%, Tracey, 1984). Fifty-three percent of the respondents were male, 88.1% were white, and 71.5% were undergraduates. When the characteristics of the responding and non-responding students were compared, it was discovered that while the groups did not differ in age, number of credits, or transfer status, there were significant group differences in GPA (higher for respondents), gender (higher response rate for females), and class standing (lower response rate for sophomores and non-degree students). Despite these differences, it was concluded that the student respondent sample was sufficiently representative of the University population for the purposes of this study.

Faculty, Staff, Administrators, and Campus Ministry Workers

A second group of participants consisted of four non-student groups: university faculty, staff, administrators, and non-university employed campus ministry workers.

A random sample of 296 names was drawn from the population of 3072 university faculty members identified as lecturers, instructors, and professors of all ranks. The staff group consisted of university employees assumed, by virtue of their job titles (e.g., student personnel worker, advisor, counselor), to spend relatively large proportions of their time with students. The administrator group was comprised of individuals with the titles of dean, director, or vice-president. Because of the relatively small populations of university staff and administrators (103 and 44, respectively), all employees in these categories were included in the study. The campus ministry workers consisted of all religious organization staff members listed in the 1983-84 University Student-Staff Directory ($N = 29$).

The response rates for the four non-student groups were 45.3%, 74.8%, 54.5%, and 44.8%, respectively.

Data Collection

The data collection procedure was similar for all groups. First, a pre-notice postcard was mailed to each subject, describing the purpose of the study and requesting the subject's participation. The survey itself was mailed one week later, along with a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Two weeks later, a follow-up postcard was mailed to all non-respondents. Finally, a telephone follow-up was carried out by Counseling Center staff.

In addition to the data supplied by the respondents themselves, further demographic data were obtained directly from the University, including gender, GPA, transfer status, age, college and class standing for students, and college appointment for faculty.

Data Analysis

The surveys were reviewed and hand-processed for keypunching onto cards. Data analysis was undertaken on a CDC Cyber 845 computer, using SPSS 8.3 programs. The analyses were largely descriptive, providing group means, standard deviations, and tests of significance.

Results

Student Sample

The results for the student sample are reported first at the concern category level, then at the item level.

Concern categories

Table 1 presents concern category means and standard deviations for the total student sample ($N = 629$). The mean concern level across all 68 items was 2.14, in the range of "Somewhat of a concern." Among the four concern categories, career concerns averaged highest (2.84), approaching a rating of "A moderate concern." Academic concern items were second highest with a mean of 2.25. Items in the relationship and personal categories averaged in the "Somewhat of a concern" range at 1.79 and 2.02, respectively.

Means, standard deviations, and tests of significance for selected student subgroups are shown in Table 2. The same rank ordering of concern categories was maintained in virtually every student group, but

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Insert Table 2 about here

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there were also some significant group differences in reported levels of concern.

Gender. Women students expressed significantly higher concern levels than men students across all items and in the personal concern category. There was also a non-significant trend for women to report slightly higher career and relationship concerns.

Grade point average. Concern level increased steadily as GPA decreased for all concern categories expect relationship, for which there was little change. All other group differences were statistically significant, the largest difference being on academic concern.

Ethnic group membership. Ethnic minority students (i.e., those who identified themselves as Asian, Black, Hispanic, or American Indian) reported significantly higher concern levels than majority students on academic and relationship concerns. There was also a non-significant trend for minority student to express greater overall concern.

Class standing. Concern level decreased steadily as class standing increased. Undergraduate students consistently reported higher concern levels than graduate and professional program students in every concern category and for nearly every item. Graduate and professional program students expressed similar levels of concern across all categories. All concern categories showed significant group differences except relationship; the largest group difference was for career.

Summary. Generally speaking, higher concern levels were associated with the following student groups: females, lower GPA students, minority ethnic group members, and undergraduate students, particularly lower division students (freshmen and sophomores). Among the four concern categories, academic and personal showed the most group differences, relationship the least.

Items

Table 3 shows the ten items of most concern to the total student sample. Career-related items dominated the list, headed by "Getting a job after I graduate."

Insert Table 3 about here

Other highly-rated career items involved career choice, job search, and identification of job-related interests and abilities. Academic concerns were also prominent, including the fifth-ranked "Managing my time" and the eighth-ranked "Getting better grades." The remaining two items on the list were drawn

from the personal concern category. "My financial situation" was ranked sixth, followed by the seventh-ranked "Identifying and planning specific goals for my life." None of the ten highest rated items were from the relationship concern category.

Table 2 also shows how those same ten items were ranked by selected student subgroups: males, females, ethnic minority and majority students, and undergraduate and graduate/professional program students. Every student group rated "Getting a job after I graduate" as their greatest single concern, followed by other career-related concerns. Item rankings were similar between the gender groups (rho = .707, $N = 10$, $p < .01$) and class standing groups (rho = .717, $N = 9$. $p < .05$); their ten greatest concerns were essentially the same ten items in slightly different order. Agreement between the ethnic minority and majority group members as low and negative (rho = -.158, $N = 9$,), not significantly different from zero. The items showing the largest rank order differences for the ethnic group comparison were "Deciding among my options for career goals" (ranked higher by the majority) and "Getting better grades" (ranked higher by the minority).

Insert Table 4 about here

Table 4 shows selected items associated with large group mean differences in both directions for the three group comparisons. (These items are not necessarily the items of greatest concern to either group; rather, they are the items showing statistically significant differences as indicated by the results of two-tailed t-tests on item means.) For the gender groups, the two items of greater concern to women were from the relationship category, involving sexual discrimination and harassment. The men students reported significantly greater

concern about shyness and completing assignments on time. The items of greatest concern to minority group students involved racial discrimination and dealing with their children, both from the relationship category. There were no concern items showing significantly greater concern to majority group students; Table 4 presents two items showing nonsignificant differences in that direction, both from the personal category. In the class standing group comparison, the undergraduate students expressed significantly greater concern for two academic items involving grades and test-taking. The graduate/professional program students indicated significantly more concern with two items pertaining to sexual and racial discrimination.

Students' Usage and Satisfaction with the Counseling Center

Almost two-thirds (64.4%) of the students indicated that they did not have enough information about the counseling services available on campus, and the same percentage indicated that they had not known about the Counseling Center. One hundred and ten students (16.9%) reported that they had used the Counseling Center; of that number, 99 (90%) said they would recommend the Counseling Center to others.

Students who had never used the Counseling Center gave their reasons as the following (in descending order of frequency): "Didn't know about the counseling Center" (39.3%); "No problems" (23.2%); "Didn't want help" (12.1%); and "Want to, but hesitant to take that step" (7.2%).

Finally, students were asked to indicate which types of counseling services they preferred (workshops, group counseling, individual counseling, written material, classes, and couples counseling) for each of the four concern categories. The students were allowed to check as many or as few choices per concern category as they wished. Individual counseling was the preferred format for every category except academic, for which workshops was the preferred format. Group counseling was the second choice for relationship concerns, but

otherwise fell behind as a third preference for personal concerns, and fourth for career or academic concerns. Couples counseling was the third choice of service for relationship concerns.

Overall, the four non-student groups tended to rate student concerns higher than did the students themselves. Compared to the students' mean overall concern level of 2.14, the mean ratings from the non-student groups were : faculty (2.93); staff (3.11); administrators (2.99); and campus ministry staff members (3.30). When asked to rank order the four concern categories from most to least concern to students, the university-employed groups accurately ranked career concerns highest, followed by academic concerns. The campus ministry staff members ranked personal concerns highest and career concerns third.

Table 5 lists the ten items of greatest concern to students as ranked

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Insert Table 5 about here

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by the four non-student groups. Each group accurately rated the item "Getting a job after I graduate" highest. The university-employed groups' highest rated items were drawn more heavily from the career concern category, while the campus ministry staff members' highest rated items contained a greater number of personal and relationship concerns. (The tendency could not be represented in Table 5 because those particular items were not among the students' ten highest rated items). There were not enough items in common between the students' and non-students' highest rated items ($N \leq 8$) to calculate rank order correlations among them, but it is apparent that the rankings of the university-employed groups agreed more closely with the students' rankings than did the campus ministry staff members'.

When asked whether they had ever referred a student to the Counseling

Center, 151 (61.9%) of the non-student groups responded that they had. Ninety-eight (44.0%) indicated that they were interested in consulting with the Counseling Center on college student development issues or the services offered by the Counseling Center.

Discussion

There were four major intentions of this study: to gather information on student concerns, to survey for counseling center visibility on campus, to assess satisfaction of students using the services, and to survey perceptions of student concerns by University faculty, administrators, staff, and campus ministry workers.

Career concerns were the highest rated and most frequent among the top ten items. Dealing with career issues has been a traditional area of service for counseling centers and likely will continue to be so. These results are consistent with national surveys of college students (Chronicle of Higher Education, September 4, 1985) that have indicated an increasingly prevalent attitude toward college as a vehicle for developing marketable skills and getting a job. Large numbers of students expressed concern for academic skills involved in getting better grades, concentration on studies, and time management.

Although the major concerns are the same or similar across all groups of students, there are groups of students whose needs ought to be particularly addressed in counseling center programs: younger students, women, ethnic minorities and lower-division students. While not the highest category of concern, it is of interest to note that interpersonal concerns are similar across groups regardless of age, stage of progression through college, and gender. For example, counseling services need to attend to the greater expressed needs of women students for coping with anxiety, stress, or fear, and to the greater expressed concerns of minority students for ways of dealing with their children and with discriminatory behavior of others.

In order to track changes in student concerns, it is important to conduct such surveys on a regular basis. Delivery of counseling services should be ever aware of and solidly grounded on the foundation of accurate assessment of student needs.

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Table 1

Summary Characteristics of the Needs Assessment Survey

Concern category	No. of items	Coefficient alpha	Mean[a]	SD[a]	Representative concerns (abbreviated)
Career	9	.88	2.84	1.03	Career choice; getting a job; identifying career-related abilities and interests
Academic	20	.93	2.25	0.84	Choice of major; study skills; test-taking; time management; working with advisor
Relationship	16	.84	1.79	0.58	Developing relationships; emotional dependency; social skills; dealing with family concerns
Personal	23	.91	2.02	0.66	Goal-setting; assertiveness; anxiety; depression; chemical use; sexual issues; finances
Overall	68	.96	2.14	0.62	

[a]Based on total student sample (N = 629), on a scale from 1 ("Not a concern") to 5 ("Very much a concern").

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Tests of Significance for Concern Categories and the Survey as a Whole, by Student Group

		Concern category								Overall concern	
		Career		Academic		Relationship		Personal			
Student group	n	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gender											
Males	333	2.78	1.01	2.24	0.84	1.74	0.52	1.95	0.60	2.09	0.59
Females	286	2.91	1.05	2.24	0.87	1.83	0.63	2.11	0.71	2.19	0.65
t		1.54		0.04		1.80		3.07**		1.97*	
GPA											
1.0 - 1.9	12	3.36	0.76	3.09	0.46	1.84	0.42	2.17	0.53	2.52	0.38
2.0 - 2.4	90	3.17	0.90	2.67	0.84	1.79	0.68	2.06	0.73	2.32	0.66
2.5 - 2.9	147	3.08	1.01	2.50	0.79	1.77	0.52	2.16	0.63	2.29	0.57
3.0 - 3.4	170	2.76	1.07	2.15	0.83	1.78	0.58	1.98	0.65	2.08	0.62
3.5 - 4.0	163	2.56	0.98	1.86	0.70	1.80	0.55	1.93	0.62	1.97	0.57
F		8.75***		24.34***		0.09		2.84*		9.34***	
Ethnic group											
Minority	62	2.87	1.11	2.49	0.95	2.00	0.80	2.08	0.75	2.29	0.76
Majority	554	2.84	1.03	2.22	0.83	1.76	0.54	2.02	0.65	2.13	0.60
t		0.20		2.42*		3.10**		0.69		1.93	
Class standing											
Freshmen	140	3.09	0.97	2.67	0.86	1.88	0.58	2.16	0.69	2.36	0.64
Sophomores	84	3.16	0.90	2.53	0.82	1.81	0.62	2.17	0.69	2.32	0.61
Juniors	106	2.99	0.93	2.37	0.74	1.81	0.58	2.13	0.65	2.24	0.59
Seniors	109	2.83	1.10	2.04	0.72	1.73	0.53	1.95	0.59	2.04	0.52
Prof. program	40	2.43	1.12	1.71	0.59	1.62	0.46	1.74	0.47	1.79	0.44
Graduate	112	2.41	0.98	1.81	0.76	1.75	0.59	1.84	0.64	1.89	0.61
Non-degree	28	2.42	1.07	2.03	0.82	1.66	0.59	1.90	0.68	1.95	0.67
F		8.66***		19.97***		1.70		5.36***		11.78***	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3

Student Groups' Rankings of Total Sample's Top Ten Concerns

CC[a]	Item	Total sample	Gender group		Ethnic group		Class group	
			Male	Female	Min.	Maj.	Under grad	Grad/ Prof.
C	Getting a job after I graduate	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
C	Identifying career goal & alternatives	2	2	3	6	2	3	3
C	Knowing how to look for a job after I graduate	3	6	2	4	3	2	6
C	Deciding among my options for career goals	4	3	4	10	4	5	2
A	Managing my time	5	4	5	8	5	6	4
P	My financial situation	6	5	6	2	6	7	5
P	Identifying specific goals for my life	7	9	7	7	7	8	7
A	Getting better grades	8	7	10	3	9	4	--[b]
C	Identifying interests in order to plan a career	9	8	9	--[b]	8	9	9
C	Identifying abilities in order to plan a career	10	10	8	5	10	10	10

[a]CC = Concern category; C = Career; A = Academic; R = Relationship; P = Personal. [b]Dash indicates that the item was not among that group's top ten concerns.

Table 4

Selected Items Showing Large Group Mean Differences

Concern category	Item	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
		Males		Females		
R	Being treated differently because of my gender	1.14	0.54	2.07	1.25	-12.26***
R	Experiencing sexual harassment	1.09	0.46	1.63	1.01	-8.68***
P	Being shy	2.14	1.21	1.91	1.18	2.34*
A	Completing assignments on time	2.29	1.30	2.07	1.26	2.13*
		Majority		Minority		
R	Being treated differently because of my race or ethnic background	1.05	0.35	2.26	1.29	17.12***
R	Dealing with my children	1.25	0.85	1.80	1.39	4.42***
P	Developing a satisfying life-style as a single person	2.23	1.34	1.93	1.12	-1.69
P	My misuse of food	1.83	1.22	1.60	1.06	-1.43
		Under-graduates		Graduate/ professional		
A	Getting better grades	3.34	1.36	2.06	1.29	10.13***
A	How to take tests of various formats	2.58	1.36	1.74	1.09	6.85***
R	Being treated differently because of my gender	1.53	1.01	1.74	1.19	-2.09*
R	Being treated differently because of my race or ethnic background	1.14	0.58	1.26	0.75	-2.03*

[a] R = Relationship; P = Personal; A = Academic.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 5

Non-Student Groups' Rankings of Students' Top Ten Concerns

CC[a]	Item	Student	Faculty	Staff	Administration	Campus Ministry
C	Getting a job after I graduate	1	1	1	1	1
C	Identifying career goal & alternatives	2	3	4	2	8
C	Knowing how to look for a job after I graduate	3	4	3	5	2
C	Deciding among my options for career goals	4	8	5	7.5	--[b]
A	Managing my time	5	--[b]	--[b]	7.5	--[b]
P	My financial situation	6	2	2	4	3
P	Identifying specific goals for my life	7	--[b]	--[b]	--[b]	--[b]
A	Getting better grades	8	5	9	--[b]	--[b]
C	Identifying interests in order to plan a career	9	6	7	3	--[b]
C	Identifying abilities in order to plan a career	10	7	6	6	--[b]

[a]Concern category; C = Career; A = Academic; R = Relationship; P = Personal. [b]Dash indicates that the item was not among that group's top ten concerns.